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Alleged US-Iran dealings linked to firing of Saudi oil minister

New Saudi oil policy said to be one of Iran's key demands on US

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Ahmad Zaki Yamani, Saudi Arabia's veteran oil minister, may have lost his job as a result of reported secret dealings between the United States and Iran.

There is strong speculation among informed Mideast political and oil observers that agreement to push for higher world oil prices may have been part of the clandestine deal between Washington and Tehran.

Mr. Yamani was fired Oct. 29 after apparently refusing to carry out Saudi King Fahd's recently adopted policy of insisting on a minimum price of \$18 a barrel.

An increase in oil prices has been an official Iranian demand in debates by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

It was also reported to be one of several demands put to US officials in alleged secret contacts with Iranian emissaries in Europe.

Al-Shiraa, the Lebanese magazine that first broke the news of a secret trip to Tehran by Robert McFarlane, said the former US national security adviser made two demands on Iran in return: that Iran help return American hostages held in Lebanon and cease support of terrorist groups abroad; and that Iran not try to destabilize Arab states in the Persian Gulf.

Well-informed sources say the Saudis' sudden adoption of the \$18 price goal, a radical departure from its policy since last year, came after strong but discreet US

pressure, presumably after the US meetings with the Iranians.

In addition to helping Iran, fixing higher oil prices would help ailing US oil producers, analysts say. But the Reagan administration, committed to a free-market philosophy, has refused to intervene directly to achieve this goal.

One result of the new Saudi policy has been to foster a remarkable détente in Saudi-Iranian relations. Bitter differences over oil policies had recently aggravated tensions - already running high over Saudi support of Iraq in the Iraq-Iran war. Iran was hard hit by last year's Saudi policy of abandoning production restraints which caused prices to plummet drastically. With its own exports curbed by Iraqi bombing raids, Iran found its much-needed revenues dwindling sharply as a result. Until August, when the new Saudi policy emerged, Iran accused the Saudis and their Gulf allies of implementing a conspiracy to bring Iran to its knees. But by September,

the Iranian oil minister visited Riyadh for talks described as "brotherly and friendly."

Other forms of Saudi-Iranian cooperation have also developed.

Informed sources say that since July, when Iraq stepped up bombing raids on Iranian refineries, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have worked through traders to sell Iran increased refined petroleum products needed for the domestic Iranian market. The Saudi push

for higher oil prices also helps Iran find funds to buy arms for use against Iraq - whose own war effort is partly bankrolled by Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies.

If the US did indeed seek security guarantees for the Gulf Arab allies as part of a package deal with Tehran, it would lessen one of the contradictions in Washington's reported supply to Iran of spare parts that might otherwise be used to threaten the Gulf. Before the release of American David Jacobsen Nov. 2 and subsequent reports about US-Iranian contacts, some reports from Tehran suggested that key Iranian leaders had adopted a more pragmatic line over exporting their "Islamic revolution." Such powerful figures as parliament speaker Hashem Rafsanjani were said to have agreed on a more friendly approach to Gulf Arab states, and even to drop their previous insistence on the establishment of an Islamic regime in Baghdad as a condition for ending the war.

Since 1982, the US - seeing a possible Iraqi collapse as threatening the stability of the whole region - has tilted toward helping Iraq.

Informed sources say Washington has provided Iraq with considerable, but discreet, support.

Some of it reportedly takes the form of intelligence supplied by satellites and surveillance planes. They say a senior US Air Force officer, resident at a Baghdad hotel, has worked closely to help the Iraqi military identify and decide how to strike Iranian targets.